

STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS
FRED CONZE, CHAIR
DARIEN PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION
DECEMBER 8, 2008

Good evening Madame Moderator, Members of the RTM, other elected and appointed officials, and the people of Darien. This annual “State of the Town” meeting gives me the opportunity to look back at our accomplishments over the past year, and what we can look forward to in 2009 and beyond.

A Look Back

First, I want to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of my fellow members of the Planning and Zoning Commission as well as the Planning & Zoning staff upon which the Commission relies. There were over 35 Planning and Zoning Commission meetings this year. The Environmental Protection Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals each met over 20 times, and the Architectural Review Board more than 10 times. As you know, these boards are comprised entirely of volunteers. An extraordinary amount of preparation is required by the boards and staff for each of these meetings.

2008 allowed us to see first-hand the fruits of our labor of past years. -

- The new Darien Library, which is scheduled to open in four weeks;
- Brooks Brothers and David Harvey Jewelers both opened about two weeks ago; and

- the new Whole Foods Market store scheduled to open in the spring of 2010 has begun demolition of old Howard Johnson's motel and restaurant.

- The new mixed-use building at 1020 Boston Post Road is open and fully leased including 3rd floor apartments, 2nd floor office space, some first floor retail space, two new restaurants and an ice cream shop with outdoor dining and convenient parking.

All of these improvements enhance the look of Darien and are stimulative to our commercial tax base, replacing older, out-of-date buildings which were in need of attention.

Last month, we approved the redevelopment of 17 Old King's Highway South, which will soon be razed and replaced with a two-story office building. The Commission also approved the lease of property for the Cottage, a residence for developmentally disabled adults on Edgerton Street. Construction on that will be complete in early 2009. This past year, the land use boards approved two Town projects--these are the Weed Beach redevelopment and the Police Station renovations. Although currently "on hold", we would expect these projects to eventually proceed, and become great assets to the community.

In May, the Commission approved in part a zoning regulation amendment put forward by Darien Revitalization Initiative. The new regulation took effect on June 29th, and allows banks only as a Special Permit use within the CBD Zone, no longer an as-of-right use.

Flooding Issues

In 2008, the local land use boards and Department staff focused much of their long-range planning efforts on the existing flooding, storm water

management, and drainage concerns. The Environmental Protection Commission, in their role as Flood and Erosion Control Board, adopted Flood and Erosion regulations. The Planning and Zoning Commission hired an outside engineering consultant to prepare a Stormwater Management Report and Draft Regulations. Our Commission, as well as the EPC and the ZBA, continue to review drainage plans closely, to ensure existing problems and concerns are remedied, and future problems averted. In November, Department staff issued a press release regarding wetlands and watercourses, bringing property owners' attention to the sensitivity of those resources, and the importance of ensuring that no blockages of those waterways cause downstream flooding problems.

In 2008, the EPC approved four dredging projects and also approved the LaForge Road and DuBois Street drainage improvements proposed by the Public Works Department.

Also this year, relative to flood avoidance, the three local land use boards approved the elevation of three single-family residences, two on Cherry Street and one on Raymond Street. These approvals, and the elevation of these houses, will allow these property owners to reduce the future likelihood of property damage. We continue to encourage residential property owners to proceed with such applications in order to minimize potential property damage. Department staff has worked closely with these property owners in applying for available Federal Grants for such work.

Staff worked closely with the Public Works Department on a letter to over 1,000 Darien property owners who live on a brook, stream or watercourse. Staff is in the process of preparing draft Zoning Regulations for the Planning & Zoning Commission's review in January 2009. These Regulations will likely contain strict requirements for applications to local

land use boards and for other significantly sized residential projects to have a professional engineer design drainage improvements to the subject property to accommodate storm water runoff. While this will put a minor burden on those who wish to develop or redevelop their property, it should minimize impacts in the future, and serve the Town well in the long-run....reducing the likelihood of future flooding problems.

What we See Ahead

Although the national economy is not as robust as it was a year or two ago, we know that we will have a very full 2009. Projects which will be reviewing include the following:

In the first quarter of the year, we will act upon a proposal for inclusionary zoning regulations. These proposed regulations would require developers of large residential projects to either construct some affordable housing or contribute to a fund to construct or maintain said housing.

We will also act upon the pending application for the Allen O'Neill redevelopment. This will be a multi-year construction project.

The Planning and Zoning Commission will hold a public hearing on the Adoption of Drainage Requirements as part of the Zoning Regulations.

The Environmental Protection Commission will be proceeding with an update of the Town's Inland Wetlands Map.

Multiple land use boards will likely be involved in reviewing the development of the former Darien Library property on Leroy Avenue—at a minimum, site plan review and rezoning will be involved.

On the planning front, the Planning and Zoning Commission and staff will be looking at redevelopment opportunities in several areas of interest

including Noroton Heights, Old Kings Highway South and certain areas of our Central Business District. The Planning and Zoning Commission will look at the possibility of modifying the Zoning Regulations to allow mixed use development as well as structured parking in tightly defined areas of Town. With respect to the latter, in any such proposal, the Commission would want to ensure that these structures are unobtrusive, safe, add value to our commercial base, but above all, fit into the small town, residential character of Darien.

Summary

Overall, we are committed to the maintenance of Darien's residential character, targeted value added commercial redevelopment, preserving the delicate balance between competing residential and non-residential land uses such as the YMCA and the Board of Education facilities and their surrounding neighborhoods, and the management of storm water related issues. We will continue to be guided by the current Town Plan of Conservation and Development adopted by this body in 2006. I give my fellow Commission members and the other local land use board members credit for their public service and commitment to maintaining the residential character of Darien.